

Not So Among Us

Mark 10:35-45

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I have always found a certain comfort in how often the gospels depict the disciples of Jesus as dummies. Over and over and over, the people closest to Jesus are idiots. It makes me feel better about myself.

But, as Rev. Paul Simpson Duke points out, “It shows that there is hope for dummies; and God can use the clueless in spite of themselves”

It also shows that the teachings of Jesus may not always be as simple as some might like to say. And, certainly, they aren’t so easy.

Case in point: on three occasions Jesus pulled his disciples aside and told them in no uncertain terms that he would be betrayed, beaten, and killed. Three times he did this and each time the disciples either didn’t understand or simply refused to listen.

The first time he did it was just after Peter had confessed him the Messiah. “You’re right, Peter – and here is what that means: I will suffer and die.” And Peter said, “Not gonna happen” (Mark 8:27ff).

The second time he tells them that he will suffer and die, the disciples immediately get into an argument among themselves over which of them is the greatest (Mark 10:30ff).

And this third time, no sooner has Jesus said that he is about to be arrested and tortured and executed, then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, trot up to him and say, “When you enter your glory can one of us sit at your right and one of us at your left?”

You can almost see Jesus hang his head: “Oof.”

He says, “You don’t what you’re talking about. Can you drink the cup that I must drink to its bitter last drop? Do you think you can be baptized by the flood that’s about to swallow me up?”

They say, “No problem.”

In their defense, they were young. Did you know that most scholars believe that at least some of the first disciples were likely mere teenagers? Teenagers.

Jesus, Immanuel, Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace, the Messiah, the Son of God... Youth Minister.

¹ For much of this sermon, I am deeply indebted to Rev. Paul Simpson Duke’s incredible sermon, “The Happiest Demotion,” which he preached at FBC, Ann Arbor, MI, on October 21, 2018.

When the others found out that James and John had asked for the prized seats, they were furious — most likely because they had had their eyes on that prize, too.

But why? Other than stupidity, is there a good reason why the disciples would want to be enthroned beside Jesus?

I think there is. They were an oppressed people. Their lives were squeezed in the blood-sucking grip of the Roman Empire — and the local leaders were corrupt, too! Before Rome, it was the Babylonians. And before the Babylonians, it was the Assyrians. And before the Assyrians, it was the Egyptians. The Jewish people could count on their two hands the number of generations that had known freedom.

By the time of Jesus, the foretold Messiah was believed to be the leader — the promised king — who would make his people free. Like Moses before him, he would perform mighty acts, he could call down fire from heaven upon his enemies, and he would march his people to freedom.

Can't you imagine being James and John, seeing Jesus perform those miracles — feeding a multitude, healing lepers, turning water into wine, walking on water, calming a stormy sea — and thinking that this was just the beginning? Just wait until this Messiah really gets going. Rome will flee before his power. The nations will tremble. And all would finally be set right.

There would be justice, compassion, truth, rejoicing, and freedom at long, long last.

What the disciples are saying is, "When you do that, just let us be by your side. Let us share in the power with you to set all things right."

How could they not want that? How could they not believe that Jesus would conquer a world that really needs conquering?

That's why they couldn't hear him. That's why they couldn't hear him when he told them that he was going to be rejected and beaten and crucified and die. Imagine the Chosen One saying, "We're marching on the enemy now to engage in battle... and I will lose."

They can't hear it — because they are utterly convinced that the Messiah *can't* lose. In their minds, it is a theological impossibility. God would not send the next Moses to *lose*. The next Moses will lead us to freedom like the last one did! And all we want is to be like Aaron — to be by your side when you do.

But Jesus says, "Come here. You are asking to be like the other rulers of this world. You know how they do. They lord it over everyone else, and their great ones are tyrants. You think you want to do good, but you're going at it like they do. You must be nothing like that. You want to be great, then you be a servant."

St. Augustine once said, "If you use bestiality to fight bestiality, then in the end bestiality wins." In Jesus' kingdom there is no room to fight wars the same old way. "We won't use the ways of tyrants to overthrow tyranny, lest tyranny live on through us," says Jesus.

"Instead, whoever among you wishes to become great must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be a slave of all." He says, "I didn't come to be put on a throne and to be served. I am here to be a servant. And I will give my life as a ransom for many. I will give my life to set many people free."

We forget, don't we, what an astonishing disappointment he could be to those who first believed he was the Messiah? We forget what a scandal he could be. All of that power, all of that promise, all of that charisma, all of that ability, and yet he kept hanging out with losers – touching lepers with his hands, eating with prostitutes, spending hours and hours with the poor, staying with tax collectors and sinners. He kept hanging out with not the religious and the pure, but with dirty sinners – and he kept washing their feet.

Isn't it amazing how we can take the words of Jesus – the one who gave up all power and authority and privilege in order to become servant of all – and manipulate them and use them not to yield power, but to uphold our places of privilege? And us clergy are the worst!

The Catholic Priest, Richard Rohr, says that when he came out of Catholic school, he could quote three verses of scripture:

- "Thou art Peter and upon this Rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18).
- "This is my body... and this is my blood..." (Matthew 26:26-28).
- "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained" (John 20:23).

He points out that the first verse of the three he had memorized is the foundational support for Papal Succession – drawing the line from Pope Francis all the way back to Peter. This verse is the basis of the Pope's authority.

The second one is from the words of institution for the sacrament of the Eucharist. And who are the only people authorized to administer the sacrament of the Eucharist in the Catholic Church? Only ordained priests.

The third verse, he points out, is the basis for confession and the sacrament of penance. And who are the only people authorized to hear your confession and administer the sacrament of penance in the Catholic Church? Only ordained priests.

He says those are the only three verses he came out of Catholic School having memorized. And then he asks, "Now, whose authority, whose power do you think those three verses are being used to uphold?" (lecture series entitled "Letting Go," session 2).

Let me ask you: Do you think any of those verses matter at all to the single mother who's working multiple jobs to keep a roof over her family's head, to put food on the table, to keep the water running and her children clean – to do all of that while trying to raise her children in faith?

Do you think that single mother is walking around saying: "Thou art Peter and upon this Rock I will build my church?"

Of course not.

What passage do you think matters to her? Maybe the widow's mite, where Jesus shows favor the poor widow and not the wealthy, religious leaders... Or maybe the story of the Syrophenician woman who argued with Jesus to heal her daughter... or maybe this one – where Jesus in no uncertain terms tells two of his most prominent disciples that it's not about attaining more honor or more glory or more power or more authority; but about letting all of that go and becoming a servant.

Think about this for a minute: our faith says that Jesus came to reveal to us what God is really like.

"And this is the revelation: that the sovereign source of the impossibly vast universe, the one who inhabits all space and time, eternal and holy, Creator and Ruler and Judge of all is... a servant. And comes to us – almighty God – to serve us" (Paul Simpson Duke, "The Happiest Demotion," October 21, 2018).

How far we still have to go. How far we still have in letting scripture make us over in God's image, and not still trying to make God over in our image.

Several years ago now, the baptist pastor, Brett Younger, wrote an article entitled, "Finding a Bible that fits."

In it, he joked sarcastically about wandering the Bible section of a bookstore, seeing the rows upon rows of Bibles, and saying to himself, "I need more choices." Don't worry, he says. The publishers had his back. He says:

"The novelty Bible industry is there for anyone still carrying the Gideon Bible they took from the Hampton Inn. Novelty Bibles dress up Holy Scripture in fashionable clothes, so to speak. The dozens of niche-marketed Bibles include *The Hope for Today Bible* (featuring notes and encouragement from Joel and Victoria Osteen), *The Charles F. Stanley Life Principles Bible*, *The Golfer's Bible*, *The Jogger's Bible*, and *The Green Bible* (a 'green letter edition'" with a thousand verses highlighted)."

He says, "Only a cynical person would see these as ploys to sell Bibles to eager proof-texters."

He goes, "Maybe what we want is not more translators but more aggressive editors. The Bible is filled with sections we could do without."

So he suggests a novelty Bible called *The Less Peculiar Bible*. "In this sensible version," he says, "the oddest rules are gone. Do we really need to break a cow's neck at the sight of an unsolved murder (Deut. 21:1-6)? What about the prohibition on two kinds of material in the same garment (Lev. 19:19)? [In it] we could even let go of capital punishment for breaking the Sabbath (Exod. 31:14).

What about a *Wealthy Americans Bible*? In this sensitive-to-the-rich version, the last judgment story about the sheep and the goats, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, and that section in Acts where the early church [shares all things in common and] sounds like a bunch of communists are all out. Who wouldn't want a Bible where Jesus tells the rich young ruler that he is fine just the way he is? Removing 3,000 verses on caring for the poor make this an ultra-thin version...

With all the advancements in self-publishing, we cannot be far from being able to order a personalized Bible. I would love to give my mother a Bible in which the Old Testament polygamists are monogamous, Jesus changes the water into Welch's grape juice, and Song of Solomon is nowhere to be found.

We are tempted to live a careful faith, keep six of the Ten Commandments, go to church twice a month, give only money we do not need, offer some grace and more judgment, and to affirm the parts of the Bible with which we already agree, but God calls us to more" (*Funny When You Think About It*, 4-6).

The truth is, we don't need to find a Bible that fits us. We need to live more fully into the one we've got.

"You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. *But it is not so among you;* whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 9:42-44).

You know, Mark Twain once said, "It's not the parts of the Bible that I don't understand that bother me; it's the parts that I do understand."

"Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

I hate that I understand what Jesus expects when he says that. But the hard part isn't in the understanding. It's in the *doing*.

Amen.